Good afternoon Senators,

School funding has long been a hot topic amongst legislators, education stakeholders and taxpayers. The long standing dilemma of the education funding debate stems from funding inequity amongst districts and more recently, the underfunding of public education due to state budget constraints.

Our existing school funding system relies heavily on property taxes giving districts with more property wealth an advantage to spend more on educating students.

In FY14, the “April surprise” revenue windfall saved Illinois school districts from financial collapse. However it’s important to note districts are still experiencing a General State Aid proration of 89%, laying off record numbers of staff and cutting basic programming such as art, music and PE.

So, what is equity?

Equity refers to the amount of variation in per pupil expenditures among the school districts of the state. When per pupil variation is reduced equity increases. Many people equate equity to fairness. There are many definitions of fairness and these definitions differ among legislators, educators and taxpayers. What is fair or equitable to educators may not be fair to taxpayers. What may be fair to taxpayers may not be fair to legislators. Even individuals within these groups cannot agree. What is fair to one legislator may not be perceived as fair to another.

A 2012 report by the Center for American Progress argues that equity should be measured by common educational attainment rather than the amount of money put into the system. This is important to note, as it requires more resources, and in turn more money, to help a student with special needs reach the same level of achievement as a student without additional needs. In an equalized system, these needs are accounted for by adjusting funding levels according to the needs of the students. Previous to this adjustment, the state must set a foundation level of funding that guarantees an adequate education for each student and cover the difference of this cost for districts that cannot meet this level with local revenues alone.

Beyond equity, Schools need adequacy

On the heels of implementing some of the biggest education reforms in the history of Illinois, it only makes sense that sufficient resources be made available to provide every child the opportunity to meet those standards. The Illinois Federation of Teachers supports efforts to rework the education funding formula as long as those efforts are done in a fair and equitable way for all students. The proper resources, and revenue, are paramount to the discussion of reworking the education funding formula.

We appreciate ability to come forward and discuss the important issues the Committee seeks to tackle. IFT staff stands ready to work together with the legislature and other education stakeholders to try find solutions to better funding Illinois’ educational system.

As an organization we do have concerns regarding the timelines set forth in SR 431 and the February 1st reporting date. We would suggest a solution that gives districts time to adequately budget for any funding changes. Also, we think it's imperative to include revenue as part of this overall discussion. In January 2014, the income tax rate in Illinois is scheduled to reduce from 5% to 3.5% limiting available revenues.